Embracing Anger
Thich Nhat Hanh

My Dear Friends, I would like to tell you how I practice when I get angry. During the war in Vietnam, there was a lot of injustice, and many thousands, including friends and disciples of mine, were killed. I got very angry. I learned that the city of Ben Tre, a city of three hundred thousand people, was bombarded by American aviation just because some guerrillas tried to shoot down American aircrafts. The guerrillas did not succeed, and the city was destroyed. The military man responsible for that later declared that he had to destroy Ben Tre to save it. I was very angry.

But at that time, I was already a practitioner. I did not say anything, nor did I act, because I knew that acting or saying things while angry may create a lot of destruction. I went back to myself, recognizing my anger, embracing it, and looked deeply into the nature of my suffering.

In the Buddhist tradition, we have the practice of mindful breathing, of mindful walking, to generate the energy of mindfulness. With that energy we can recognize, embrace and transform our anger. Mindfulness is the kind of energy that helps us be aware of what is going on inside of and around us. Anybody can be mindful. When you breath in and you know that you are breathing in, and you focus your attention on your in-breath, that is mindfulness of breathing. The basic practice in Zen centres is the practice of generating mindfulness every moment of your daily life. When you are angry, you are aware that you are angry. Because you already have the energy of mindfulness in you, created by the practice, you can recognize, embrace, look deeply, and understand the nature of your suffering.

I was able to understand the nature of the suffering in Vietnam. I saw that not only did Vietnamese suffer but Americans suffered as well during the war. The young American man who was sent to Vietnam in order to kill and be killed underwent a lot of suffering, and the suffering continues today. The family, the nation also suffers. I could see that the cause of our suffering in Vietnam was not American soldiers. It is a kind of policy that is not wise. It is a misunderstanding. It is fear that lies at the foundation of the policy.

Many in Vietnam had burned themselves in order to call for a cessation of the destruction. They did not want to inflict pain on other people, they wanted to take the pain on themselves in order to get the message across. But the sounds of planes and bombs were too loud. So I decided to go to America and call for a cessation of the violence. That was in 1966, and because of that I was prevented from going home. And I have lived in exile ever since.

I was able to see that the real enemy of man was not man. The real enemy is our

ignorance, discrimination, fear, craving, and violence. I did not have hate for the American people or the American nation. I came to America in order to plead for a kind of looking deeply so that the government could revise that kind of policy. I met with Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and told him the truth about the suffering. I was very grateful for his quality of listening. Three months later, when the war intensified, I heard that he resigned from his post.

Hatred and anger were not in my heart. That is why I was listened to by many young people in my country when advocating them to follow the path of reconciliation. Together we helped to bring about the new organizations for peace in Paris. I hope my friends here in New York are able to practice the same. I understood, I understand suffering and injustice, and I feel that I understand deeply the suffering of New York, of America. I feel I am a New Yorker. I feel I am American.

deep listening

In Buddhism we speak of the practice of deep listening, compassionate listening, a wonderful method by which we can restore communication - communication between partners, between father and son, between mother and daughter, communication between nations to understand the suffering of others.

I always advise a couple that when they are angry with each other, they should go back to their breathing, their mindful walking, embrace their anger, and look deeply into the nature of their anger. And they may be able to transform that anger in just fifteen minutes or a few hours. If they cannot do that, then they will have to tell the other person that they suffer, that they are angry, and that they want the other person to know it. They will try to say it in a calm way. "Darling I suffer, and I want you to know it." And in Plum Village, where I live and practice, we advise our friends not to keep their anger for more than twenty-four hours without telling the other person. And if they are not calm enough to say it, they can write it down.

The second thing they can say or write down is, "I am doing my best." It means, "I am practicing not to say anything, not to do anything with anger, because I know that in doing so I will create more suffering. So I am embracing my anger, I am looking deeply into the nature of my anger." You tell the other person that you are practicing holding your anger, understanding your anger, in order to find out whether that anger has come from your own misunderstanding, wrong perception, your lack of mindfulness and your lack of skilfulness.

And the third thing you might like to say to him or her is, "I need your help." Usually when we get angry with someone, we want to do the opposite. We want to say, "I don't need you. I can survive by myself alone." "I need your help" means " I need your practice, I need your deep looking, I need you to help me to overcome this anger because

I suffer." And if I suffer, then there is no way that you can be happy, because happiness is not an individual matter. So helping the other person to suffer less, to smile, will make you happy also.

Those three things I proposed are the language of true love. It will inspire the other person to practice, to look deeply, and together you will bring about understanding and reconciliation. I propose my friends to write down these sentences on a piece of paper and slip it into their wallets. Every time they get angry they can practice mindful breathing, take it out, and read. It will be a bell of mindfulness telling them what to do and what not to do. These are the three sentences: "I suffer and I want you to know it." "I am doing my best." "Please help." I believe that in an international conflict, the same kind of practice is possible also.

practicing peace

This summer a group of Palestinians came to Plum Village and practiced together with a group of Israelis, a few dozen of them. We sponsored them coming and practicing together. In two weeks, they learned to sit together, walk mindfully together, enjoy silent meals together, and sit quietly in order to listen to each other. The practice was very successful. At the end of the two weeks, they gave us a wonderful report. One lady said, "Thay, this is the first time in my life that I see that peace in the Middle East is possible." Another young person said, "Thay, when I first arrived in Plum Village, I did not believe it was something real because in the situation of my country, you live in constant fear and anger. When your children get onto the bus, you are not sure that they will be coming home. When you go to the market, you are not sure that you will survive to go home to your family. When you go to Plum Village, you see people looking at each other with loving-kindness, talking with others kindly, walking peacefully, and doing everything mindfully. We did not believe that it was possible."

But in the peaceful setting of Plum Village, they were able to be together, to live together, and to listen to each other, and finally understanding came. They promised that when they returned to the Middle East, they would continue to practice. They will organize a day of practice every week at the local level and a day of mindfulness at the national level. And they plan to come to Plum Village as a bigger group to continue the practice.

There are people everywhere in the world that consider vengeance as their deepest desire. They become terrorists. When we have hatred and vengeance as our deepest desire, we will suffer terribly also. Our deepest desire should be to love, to help and not to revenge, not to punish, not to kill. Hatred can never answer hatred: all violence is injustice. Responding to violence with violence can only bring more violence and injustice, more suffering, not only to other people but suffering to ourselves. This is wisdom that is in every one of us. We need to breathe deeply, to get calm in order to

touch the seed of wisdom, which will bring a lot of relief. That is why my suggestion is the practice of being calm, being concentrated and watering the seeds of wisdom and compassion that are already in us. This is a true revolution, the only kind that can help us get out from this difficult situation where violence and hatred prevail.

When I first heard that Ben Tre was destroyed by American bombardiers, I got very angry. As a practitioner, I went back to my breathing and I looked deeply. And compassion in me arose. I wrote this poem:

I hold my face in my two hands.
No, I am not crying.
I hold my face in my two hands
to keep my loneliness warm-
two hands, protecting,
two hands, nourishing
two hands preventing
my soul from leaving me
in anger.

(Excerpted from a talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh at Riverside Church in New York on September 25th, 2001.)